

“Greater Love
Hath No
Man . . .”

SERGEANT SCOTT MONTOYA

For the Iraqi citizens in the slum now known as Sadr City, it was another tense day as the invasion of their country marked its third week. Some didn't know whether to cheer or hide from the Americans who were patrolling the dangerous and unsecured streets. They didn't know if the next block would erupt in a firefight, if the next intersection would turn into a kill zone, or if the next storefront would unleash a deadly RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). Yet, despite risking death simply by walking down the sidewalk, the people tried to carry on with their everyday lives.

On April 8, 2003, on the outskirts of the capital city of Baghdad, Sergeant Scott Montoya watched women buy vegetables at the open-air market, men tinker with cars at the auto-repair shop, and children ask soldiers for candy. The

33-year-old Marine scout sniper and his four-man squad had just finished delivering mail to members of another sniper team. And even though he and his men had longed for a hot meal and a hot shower after engaging in several firefights in previous days, they agreed to help another company patrol the urban area. They could have used the rest, because the biggest battle – the fight to secure Baghdad – was near.

Soon gunfire broke out a few blocks away and increased in intensity, triggering an uneasy feeling in Montoya. *We're about to get into a serious fight, and I don't feel good about this one*, he told himself. For one thing, his squad was separated from the other platoon without any mortars or tanks for support. For another, the Marines weren't sure where the small-arms fire was coming from, only that it was getting closer. Then he heard over a two-way radio that a radio operator had been shot in the head and killed by an enemy sniper.

Suddenly, rapid gunfire exploded all around him. Montoya and his men ducked behind a wall, dropped to the ground, and began shooting back. RPGs whistled overhead, and grenade blasts sent chunks of concrete into the air. Everything was happening so fast. When an RPG exploded nearby, two Marines who were crouching next to him went down. Struck by shrapnel, they suffered injuries to their heads and arms. *Five minutes into the fight and already we have casualties*, he thought.

"Corpsman!" he yelled.

A corpsman rushed over to administer first aid and then said, "We need to set up a CCP [casualty collection point]."

Rushing around the corner, Montoya and the corpsman kicked open the gate of a house that had a courtyard. "This will

make a good CCP," said Montoya. Then he helped escort the wounded there.

The Marines were pinned down on all sides. Another RPG smashed into a wall close to him, flinging pieces of shrapnel that tore into Montoya's forearm. But he was so focused on killing insurgents that he wasn't sure how badly wounded he was.

Through the billowing smoke of combat, Montoya and his fellow snipers were shooting at selected targets, especially Iraqi cars and pickups carrying heavily armed militants. The drivers were shot before the vehicles could reach the Marines.

But then one car did break through the Americans' line and crashed into a utility pole in the marketplace. Montoya, who was 100 yards away, saw the driver bend down. "He's got a mortar!" The sergeant sprinted close to the car and shot the militant before the man could fire his weapon. The Marines nearby cheered. Suddenly, Montoya felt a bit less overwhelmed. *The tide has turned, he thought. The momentum is swinging our way.*

Sergeant Scott Montoya was about to show what it means to be a Marine – but in a way that had nothing to do with killing the enemy.

The middle son of five siblings, Scott grew up in Southern California without a father figure because his dad died when the boy was young. Scott turned into a tough kid who was quick to fight and slow to forgive. Because he tended to settle any dispute with his fists, his mother took him to karate class

when he was 14 in the hopes that he could channel his anger into a sport before he ended up in serious trouble.

Through martial arts, Scott discovered an untapped passion. His instructor, Paul Dye, worked patiently with the teenager and taught him to be selfless not selfish, to think of others first, and to respect authority and himself. Scott spent hours and hours learning karate and perfecting his skills until he became Dye's best and most devoted student. Scott's dedication to martial arts carried over in his daily life. As a senior in high school, he never missed a day of class and earned straight A's. By age 19, Karate Scotty was a black belt competing against adults.

After graduation, he worked as an electronics technician and martial arts instructor and attended college. When Montoya was 21, a friend told him, "I'm taking an exam for a sheriff's deputy position. Why don't you come with me and take the test, too." Montoya did. He passed; his friend failed.

After joining the Orange County sheriff's department, Montoya noticed certain deputies shared a special bond. They had their own greeting, calling one another Devil Dog and Leatherneck and saying things like "We ate the same dust." Montoya learned they were all former Marines. *They're closer within five minutes of being introduced than some of us who've known each other for years*, Montoya thought. *I want to be a part of that special brotherhood.*

He quit his job and sold his car, motorcycle, and computer. He held a garage sale to get rid of the rest of his possessions and put the money in the bank. Then he strode into the local

Marine recruiter's office and announced, "I want to be a grunt [slang for infantryman]."

"It's the hardest job in the military," the recruiter said. "You carry a pack, you stay in the field, and you're usually cold, hungry, and wet. And, oh, yeah, you're the first one to go to war."

"Sounds good to me."

"You'll also have the best training and the most exciting time of your life."

Although Montoya scored exceptionally high in his aptitude tests, which qualified him for more glamorous positions in the Corps, he insisted on being a grunt. So at the age of 25, he entered boot camp, joining recruits who were years younger than him. In fact, even his drill instructor was younger, prompting others to call Montoya Grand Old Man or Grandpa. But his age gave him an edge over the less mature "boots." He excelled at everything he did because his martial arts training had improved his discipline, mental health, physical strength, maturity, and leadership skills.

While on active duty, Montoya finished number one in the School of Infantry and spent two and a half years as the squad automatic weapons gunner on a line platoon. He shined at the rigorous and elite Scout Sniper School, where training included brutal exercises that involved beatings so he would know what to expect if he were a prisoner of war. He became an expert in escape and evasion and long-range marksmanship and was in a scout sniper platoon for 18 months. He also became a martial arts instructor and trainer.

Changing his status to that of Marine reservist, Montoya resumed his career as a sheriff's deputy. Three weeks after the devastating terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, his reserve captain called and said, "We're probably going to war. You have forty-eight hours to decide whether you want to go back on active-duty status."

Montoya didn't hesitate. "I'm going back."

After months of more training as a scout sniper, he was shipped to Kuwait, attached to the Scout Sniper Platoon, Second Battalion, Twenty-third Marines, First Marine Division. He instructed hundreds of fellow Marines in the finer points of martial arts while they waited for orders to invade Iraq. The night before the invasion of March 20, 2003, Montoya and 1,100 other Marine grunts who would form the tip of the spear – the first to cross into Iraq – sat in the desert to hear Major General James N. Mattis say in part:

"For the mission's sake, our country's sake, and the sake of the men who carried the division's colors in past battles – who fought for life and never lost their nerve – carry out your mission and keep your honor clean. Demonstrate to the world that there is 'No better friend, no worse enemy' than a U.S. Marine."

Montoya took the words to heart. When his unit stormed across the border and charged toward Baghdad, he felt great compassion for the poor Iraqi farmers who struggled to raise their goats and herd their sheep. He tossed them packaged meals whenever he could and passed out candy to the children. But he was relentless when attacking the enemy and protecting

his fellow Marines. No one was going to stop him and his men from completing their mission and routing Iraqi forces.

While waiting out a raging two-day dust storm, Montoya took a few moments to write in his journal: "I shot a man today as he popped his head out of a tower window, and he went down. I saw him shooting at the Marines behind me. It all happened so fast I am not sure what to say. His image will haunt me, and I will think about it for a lifetime. I do know that his family is sad that he is dead. . . . When men try to kill one another, only one thing becomes evident: It is better to be alive than dead.

"Being in a firefight or combat is almost like watching a videogame. Everything happens so fast, and then you have moments of clarity. . . . The smoke and the gunfire come from all directions. And the artillery is so loud that you can never get used to the explosions. . . .

"The country is riddled with war and death. . . . Wow, how the Iraqi [soldiers] have such hatred for us. If they ever capture us, they will torture and kill us. I'm not sure where all this hatred comes from, but it's very ugly. The people seem very scared of us. They mostly want food from us or smokes. The other ones want us dead. They fly red-and-black flags over their homes to show support for Saddam and his military. They also look at us, and what we're doing, and report back to their officials on the numbers and capabilities of our regimental combat team."

As the Marines pressed toward Baghdad, Montoya kept reminding himself to always do the right thing and follow his moral compass. He understood that his enemies were only those

Iraqis who chose to fight. He had no quarrel with the citizens who wanted nothing more than to raise their families and work at their jobs without fear of getting shot or blown up.

Soon he was in the middle of a ferocious firefight in Sadr City, where everything he stood for – the Marine, the trained killer, the selfless man – was being tested in ways he never could have imagined.

Across a major intersection, he saw automatic and small-arms fire coming at him from all directions. Montoya and his men met up with the other platoons in a part of the town where closed-up shops lined a normally busy thoroughfare. While the Marines were fighting Iraqi soldiers, armed militants who were crammed in cars and pickups roared by, shooting at the Americans.

"Corpsman! We need a corpsman!" a Marine yelled.

Montoya saw that a white car filled with Iraqis had been riddled with bullets and had come to a halt in the middle of the road. "They're civilians and they're hurt!" he shouted. Turning to two comrades, he urged, "Let's try to help them. It's the right thing to do."

Braving enemy fire, the trio rushed out to the car and forced open the doors. The driver, a middle-aged man, was slumped over dead with bullet wounds to the head and chest. Another man in the front seat was bleeding badly from a gaping gash in his right leg. Pointing to the hole where his shin used to be, he was crying, shaking, and jabbering in Arabic. Then he started losing consciousness.

In the backseat, Montoya saw two young women and an elderly lady who all had been shot. One of the younger women

was holding her bloody stomach while the other one was clutching her hand, which had a finger blown off. The aged woman was gripping a spot on her arm that had been hit by a round. All three were hysterical. And then Montoya spotted a blood-splattered toddler huddled between them. She, fortunately, had not been hurt. "We're going to try to help you," he told the women, not sure they understood a word he said.

Gunfire from militants across the road struck near the car, driving off two of the Marines. Montoya saw that the shots were coming from a mosque 100 yards away. *I can't believe they would actually shoot at us from a holy place*, he thought.

He wanted to race for cover, but he refused to leave the civilians in the kill zone. He pointed to the street corner next to the CCP and shouted to the women, "Run over there!"

They scrambled out of the car and hustled for safety. Meanwhile, Montoya hurried around to the other side, bent over, grabbed the wounded man, and pulled him out by the shoulders. Rounds were whizzing inches over his head, so he didn't dare stand up.

Dropping to a sitting position, Montoya dragged him slowly across the road. *This is taking forever*, the leatherneck thought. *We're sitting ducks*. Seeing how exposed he was, some of his comrades kept firing at the enemy so the militants couldn't get too many clear shots at Montoya.

For 200 yards, he worked his way back with the bleeding man until they reached the CCP where the corpsman was working on the young woman who had been shot in the abdomen. She was shrieking and yelling in Arabic.

"What can I do to help?" Montoya asked.

"Stop the bleeding on the guy's leg," the corpsman replied. Montoya quickly applied a pressure bandage.

The other young woman, the one who had lost her finger, moaned over and over, "Why did you shoot us? Why did you shoot us?"

"You speak English," Montoya said with surprise. "What is your name?"

"Anna. That's my sister, Nora. I think she's dying!"

Montoya looked at the corpsman, who gave him a slight nod, indicating that he thought Nora would survive. "Doc is doing everything he can to save her."

"And our mother and my niece?"

"Your mother will be fine, and your niece wasn't harmed."

"But why did you shoot us?"

Montoya knew why. Civilians like Anna and her family were still driving on the four-lane road that sliced through the fire-fight, not realizing they were entering a combat zone. Some militants had lain on the ground, waiting for a civilian car to pass before shooting at the Marines. Because sound waves travel slower than bullets, it seemed to the leathernecks on the other side of the road that the occupants in the passing car were insurgents firing at them. So the Marines shot at the car, unaware that the occupants were innocent civilians.

The Iraqis were setting us up! Montoya thought.

More explosions rocked the block. Montoya ran toward an intersection and saw a Marine had been dazed by one of the blasts and was in shock, stumbling aimlessly about. *I've got to get him out of there,* Montoya thought.

He dashed out into the open, threw his comrade's arm over his shoulder, and brought him to safety.

In all the chaos, corpsmen had lost some of their medical gear. Bandages, wraps, pressure packs, and other equipment were scattered in the street. Trying to ignore the massive amount of bullets flying around, Montoya darted back and forth, scooping up the items and returning them to the grateful corpsmen.

The sounds of explosions from RPGs and increasing enemy firepower continued to echo off the buildings. As Montoya leaned against a wall, firing at the enemy, he spotted a fallen leatherneck, a big machine gunner, in the middle of the street. The Marine had been shot in the leg and was bleeding and unconscious. *If someone doesn't go out and get him, he'll be taken prisoner and tortured*, Montoya thought. *There's no way I can leave him there. Marines don't abandon their fellow Marines.* From his years in the Corps, he lived by an unbreakable code: As a Marine, you're never alone, because you will never be left behind just as you do not leave others behind.

Montoya scanned the area. Militants seemed to be shooting out of every open window in sight. *How am I ever going to make it to that Marine? He's pretty big, but I'm tough. My legs and back are strong.* Montoya sprinted out to the wounded leatherneck and tried to pick him up, but to his dismay, he couldn't. *He's too heavy, and I don't have the strength to carry him! I wish I was one of those superheroes right now.*

Every second Montoya remained exposed increased his chances of getting shot. *I've got to make him lighter.* It took a

long minute – what seemed like an hour – for him to strip the Marine's helmet, ammunition, and machine gun and get rid of about 60 pounds of gear. *Hurry, hurry, hurry!* Montoya, wearing 80 pounds of his own equipment, finally picked up his wounded comrade, folded him over his shoulder, and plodded about 500 yards toward the CCP, fearing that at any second he would get gunned down. As shots rang out from different positions, he felt pieces of concrete thwack him in the legs from rounds that barely missed him.

Dear God, please don't let me get hit, he prayed. Montoya ran as best he could bent at an angle, figuring he had a better chance of living if he were shot in the rear or the back of the leg rather than in the side of his chest.

When Montoya brought the wounded Marine to the CCP, a corpsman smiled and said, "Way to go. That's number two."

I can't believe I didn't get shot, Montoya thought.

Returning to the battle, he soon spotted another comrade who had been wounded and was sprawled in the fire-swept street.

The enemy was shooting from several vantage points, including the mosque across the street. The Marines had orders not to shoot at a mosque, because it was a holy site. Montoya felt his humanity was being severely tested. *Do I shoot at the mosque to protect my Marine? I can't let him die out there,* he thought, staring at the prone leatherneck. *I know they're using him as bait, waiting to shoot whoever goes out to try and help him.*

Then Montoya thought of the Bible verse John 15:13, which had long been stamped in his soul: "Greater love hath no man

than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." He didn't want to die, but in his heart and mind he was willing to risk his life if it meant a chance at saving another's life.

I'll wait for a lull in the fire and then . . . boom . . . I'll run out there. I'll use the best cover, the best route, and run as fast as I can. So once again he charged out into the open to rescue a wounded comrade. When he reached him, Montoya kneeled down, draped him over his shoulder, and then began the long run back. Despite being in top physical condition, the firefight had sapped much of his strength. Now the muscles in his legs felt like they were burning. *I can't afford to slow down.*

He didn't ask anyone to cover him. But he could tell that those Marines who saw what he was doing gave him the suppressive fire he needed. *That's what I expected they would do.* The heavy cover kept the enemy from taking aim at him.

When Montoya arrived at the CCP, the same corpsman announced, "Hey, that's number three!"

A short while later, Montoya saw another Marine go down from a grenade in the street. *How many times can I go out there before I get shot?* he wondered. Despite feeling increasingly at risk, he felt compelled to act. *While I have a breath of air in my lungs, there's no way I'm going to leave him lying there.* Montoya raced out as bullets zipped and zinged to his left and right. He threw the Marine's arm around his shoulder and together they made it to the CCP.

"Number four!" shouted the corpsman.

By now, Montoya was running out of gas. Yet, seeing another comrade staggering in the open from the effects of a

nearby grenade blast, Montoya once again charged out and helped the leatherneck to safety.

"That's number five!" the awed corpsman yelled out.

The firefight lasted through the night and into the next morning. Montoya could barely function, because he was so exhausted and dehydrated. Yet he kept fighting as though his body were on automatic pilot. Incredibly, although he took some shrapnel in his arm, no bullet pierced his flesh. When the battle finally ended, the weary, drained leatherneck hurt all over. Every bone, every muscle, every organ ached.

But he felt so good in his heart. All the Marines he saved – none of whom he knew or had ever spoken to before – recovered. Later, when he summoned images in his mind of that fateful day – of the bullets, rockets, and grenades that he selflessly defied for the sake of others – he thought, *I would do it all again. Yeah, I would do it all again.*

In 2005, Sergeant Scott Montoya received the Navy Cross for his lifesaving actions, becoming the first scout sniper of the Iraq War to earn the award. He also was given the Navy Achievement Medal for teaching martial arts to 850 Marines.

"There's something special about being awarded the Navy Cross by your peers, because it means they believe in you," Montoya said of the honor. "What I did was an act of love. But I also want to make the distinction that it is not mine alone. I hold the Navy Cross in trust for all the Marines who came before me and those that will come after me."